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The Goſpel Credibility defended againſt the Objection of its Decreaſe by Length of Time.

IN A

SERMON

PREACHED BEFORE THE

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD,

AT ST. MARYS CHURCH,

ON SUNDAY, JULY IV. MDCCLVI.

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MDCCLVI.

MATTHEW 28. 20.

AND LO! I AM WITH YOU ALWAY EVEN UNTO THE END OF THE WORLD.

THESE Words in their primary ſenſe expreſs the gracious Promiſe, which Chriſt gave juſt before his Aſcenſion into Heaven, That He would for ever continue to accompany and aſſiſt his faithful Diſciples and their future Succeſſors, in advancing the Work of the Miniſtry. But they may in a more general View be not improperly or unfairly extended to denote the Perpetuity of the Evidences of his Religion; and to intimate, That Mankind in all future Generations and periods of the World ſhould never be left deſtitute of ſufficient means of knowing, and ſatisfactory grounds for embracing, the Truth of the Goſpel.

Yet the Enemies of Chriſtianity, in direct contradiction to this, repreſent it as abſurd to ſuppoſe, that the Credit of any Revealed Reli-

gion can be perpetual or even laſting for any conſiderable ſpace of Time. For every external Revelation being, they ſay, built upon Facts as its Groundwork and Baſis, The truth of ſuch facts muſt continually become leſs and leſs credible; and this from the very Nature of Teſtimony, and the fate which neceſſarily attends the Conveyance of it: ſince Experience aſſures us, that Facts of every kind and of what moment or importance ſoever, which paſs ſucceſſively thro' ſeveral hands, are at each ſtep ſo much alter'd, miſrepreſented, and diſguiſed from a variety of Cauſes, that it becomes next to impoſſible at any diſtance of time to diſcover the genuine features of truth, or to know with certainty the Original State of the caſe. And this Obſervation they think applicable to all written Hiſtory, ſacred as well as profane; the tranſmiſſion of it to remoter times being in like manner attended with numberleſs depravations, which at every remove both violate its purity and impair its Credit. The Decreaſe of which is therefore regular, and proportionable to the Length of time elapſed, and is even capable of being determined by exact calculation. The Inference from the whole is this, that the Evidence for the truth of Chriſtianity is in the preſent Age extremely faded and weak, and muſt

continue to wear away by inſenſible degrees, till at length it be utterly extinguiſhed and loſt.

One cannot help reflecting, at the firſt View of this Objection, upon the inconſiſtency which reigns among the ſeveral Schemes of Infidelity. At one time the Late Seaſon of the publication of the Goſpel is urged as an Argument againſt it, and at another its very Antiquity is thought a Juſt reaſon for diſbelieving it. If in the Opinion of ſome it is too Recent a diſcovery to be the Gift of an all-gracious and merciful God, it is in the Judgment of others already too Ancient to be admitted as credible by Man. So perfectly alike are the preſent Adverſaries of the Chriſtian Religion and the firſt Enemies of the perſon of Chriſt, who, "though they brought "many falſe Witneſſes againſt him," yet their Accuſations "agreed not together."

It may be further obſerved, that If this Poſition is Juſt, it muſt ſeem impoſſible for the Almighty to deliver any ſtanding Revelation for the perpetual inſtruction of Mankind. For "whether the Doctrine come from God, or "whether it be of Man," it muſt according to this ſuppoſition in a courſe of Ages "alike come "to nought:" Unleſs indeed the mouldering Fabric ſhould be continually repaired, and miraculouſly ſupported from time to time by freſh

interpoſitions of Divine Power. And this muſt cauſe the ſame impoſſibility to recurr, ſince Miracles ſo frequently repeated muſt at length loſe both their Nature and Name, and become unfit Proofs of any Extraordinary Revelation at all.

But to conſider a little both the juſtneſs and the extent of the Poſition itſelf. And here it muſt appear manifeſtly wrong to lay down this or indeed any General, Abſtract Rule as holding uniformly and regularly in all caſes of Teſtimony, which are of ſo mixed and complex a Nature, and which depend upon and are diſtinguiſhed by, ſuch an almoſt infinite variety of circumſtances. — Or ſhould it for the moſt part hold good, yet it can be properly applied in no larger extent than the foundation on which it reſts will warrant; and this in the preſent caſe is the obſerved Decreaſe of certainty in the propagation of popular and ordinary Reports: But can any juſt inference be made from Oral Teſtimony, which is looſe, unconnected, and broken at every ſtep of its progreſs, and thereby gives free ſcope for every poſſible motive to operate, by which the Truth of any Fact may gradually ſuffer; can any Juſt Concluſion, I ſay, be made from ſo irregular a channel of Information as this, to the caſe of Litterary Records; in which every thing is fixed and permanent,

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and which from ſeveral conſiderations that might be inſiſted on, contain juſt as full ſecurity againſt this progreſſive departure from truth, as the other affords ample opportunities for it. — Or if ſomewhat like this were in general granted even of written Tradition, yet, unleſs it were ſtrictly neceſſary and unavoidable in the Nature of things, many particular Hiſtories may be ſo circumſtanced as to be entirely exempted from it. And it is certain, that each of them has a right to be conſidered by itſelf, to have the merits of its own Evidence examined apart, and to be judged by the weight of thoſe peculiar circumſtances which belong to its own Conveyance. — Or to make yet further conceſſions, ſhould it be allowed that the Credit of all other ancient Hiſtories whatever might be affected by the influence of this principle, it would nevertheleſs be quite foreign and impertinent in the preſent inſtance of the Goſpel Records. For theſe claim to have been "given by the Inſpiration of God," and at the ſame time to contain Truths of the moſt intereſting nature to Mankind, no leſs than "the Words of eternal Life" and Happineſs. And therefore till this Claim is invalidated by other and ſtronger arguments than have hitherto been brought againſt it, it is moſt reaſonable to ſuppoſe, not only that an extraordi-

nary care of Men would be exerted in their preſervation, but that the Providence of God would, as oft as Occaſion required, immediately interpoſe to ſecure them from all Injuries either Caſual or Wilful: Notwithſtanding the Relations of ordinary matters, derived from a Source and intruſted to a Cuſtody merely Human, might thro' length of time be liable to a gradual decay and at laſt a total loſs of Credit.

But, not to dwell any longer on the General conſideration of this Principle, I ſhall endeavour in this diſcourſe to ſhew the falſhood of it as applied to the Hiſtorical and other Evidences of the Chriſtian Religion. And this by an Appeal to Experience and Fact; from which it may appear, that the Force of this Evidence is not in any reſpect conſiderably diminiſhed, and in ſome is greatly augmented and improved.

And firſt, The Credibility of the Goſpel Hiſtory muſt, it is pretended, labour at preſent under great diſadvantages and ſtrong ſuſpicions, when we look back on the numerous Ages paſt ſince its firſt publication, and reflect on the many Corruptions, Changes and Forgeries which it is natural to think would happen in moſt, and which it is well known were actually put in practice in ſome periods of its Paſſage. Nor is this Fact altogether to be denied; unwarrantable liberties

liberties were taken by wicked and ill-diſpoſed Men in ſome of the earlier Ages, in attempting both to obtrude forged Goſpels upon the World, and to adulterate the True. But the Infidel grounds his miſtruſts on a part only of the real matter of Fact, which a view of the whole might eaſily remove. For to whom is it we are indebted for the knowlege of thoſe fraudulent proceedings? Not to the Enemies but the Primitive defenders of Chriſtianity; who, wanting neither a due veneration for the lively Oracles of God, nor abilities and means of every kind to aſcertain their authority, took care to guard them from all foreign mixture with the moſt ſcrupulous attention. And it was with this view, that as they publickly expoſed every ſuch corrupt or ſpurious Production for the ſatisfaction of their own times, ſo they recorded and ſpecified it in their writings for the Information and direction of Poſterity. If therefore it be certain, that Attempts were ever made to falſify the ſacred writings, it is not leſs certain that they were immediately detected and fruſtrated. The Evidence which ſubſiſts at preſent concerning this their detection reſts preciſely upon the ſame authority, as does that of their Exiſtence. And therefore the genuine and truly inſpired Goſpels ſtill remain unſullied in their Credit, ſo far as any actual

tual endeavours to the contrary may be thought to affect it. And ſuch as are imaginary and barely ſuppoſed, deſerve not the leaſt regard.

It is indeed true, that the Relative Credibility, or the ſatisfaction which an inquiſitive Chriſtian might receive concerning the authority of the Holy Scriptures, has not been in all Ages the ſame. This is more eminently obſervable of that long Night of Superſtition and Ignorance, when not only the Worſhip and the Doctrines of Chriſtianity were groſſly corrupted, but the Scriptural Evidence of its truth was in a great degree obſcured and diminiſhed. Indeed, while the Spiritual Leaders of thoſe times had recourſe to almoſt any other ſupports of the Chriſtian Faith, rather than the written Word of God, which they induſtriouſly repreſented both as precarious and inſufficient, it was ſcarce to be expected that they ſhould be very ſollicitous to keep alive and ſtrengthen the proper Grounds of its Authority. At the ſame time the General decay, if not total Extinction of Learning among them, utterly diſabled them from doing it, if they had been ever ſo ſtrongly diſpoſed to it. The Proofs however and the ſeveral Marks both of the genuineneſs and purity of the Everlaſting Goſpel ſtill ſubſiſted in the midſt of this darkneſs, while they lay either quite unheeded or

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but little underſtood, waiting only for a more favourable ſeaſon to bring them forth in their native Luſtre and full ſtrength.

And this Opportunity was, by the bleſſing of God, afforded by the Reformation. For ſince this Period every falſe and doubtful Principle of Faith being diſcarded and the ſacred writings adhered to as the only unerring ſtandard of Righteouſneſs, Theſe Writings have been brought to the Teſt, accurately examined, and ſucceſsfully aſcertained. The particular proofs indeed of their authenticity which have ariſen in the progreſs of this Enquiry, are not leſs Recent than they are Various and deciſive. Thus the Argument taken from the exact agreement of all the manuſcripts of the New Teſtament, of whatever Age and wherever found, was before unthought of, while thoſe manuſcripts lay buried in their ſeparate receſſes and diſperſed in the diſtant regions of the World. It was from the Juxtapoſition, and the diligent Compariſon of them, and the faithful Notation of their minuteſt differences, that the Proof reſulted: And it was a Proof of a Growing Nature; gathering new ſtrength as faſt as freſh Copies appeared and increaſing its Validity in proportion to their Variety and Number. The ſame Reflexion will hold good of moſt, if not of all the external Rules,

by which the purity of the Evangelic Hiſtory is ſupported: The uniform appearance of all the Verſions of it in every different Language, The concurrence of the large Citations from it in the earlieſt Chriſtian Writers, and the Confirmation given to it both by Jewiſh and Pagan Contemporaries; Theſe and the like evidences were in a manner brought to light, when thoſe Languages were revived, and the ſtudy of them came to be generally promoted and eagerly purſued, and when the learned treaſures of Antiquity were minutely canvaſſed, with a view chiefly to obtain and to give ſatisfaction in this particular point.

In a word, the Credibility of the New Teſtament, as a true and Authentic Memorial of the Facts and Doctrines of the Chriſtian Religion has by the induſtry and zeal of theſe latter Ages been eſtabliſhed to a degree not only greatly ſuperior to what it continued to be for many preceding Centuries, but nearly equal to its condition in the earlieſt Ages of the Church.

And this advantageous ſtate of the Hiſtorical Evidence of our Religion, as it is in a great meaſure owing to the Revival of Litterature and to ſome particular diſcoveries which facilitated its progreſs, ſo more eſpecially to one particular branch of it, which was hardly known or but ſuperficially cultivated in any preceding Age; I mean,

mean, Critical Learning: Not barely that confined ſpecies, which is employed in the examination of Verbal matters, but the more enlarged and extenſive exerciſe of it: which, when ſupported by a general knowlege of the ſeveral languages of Antiquity, and an acquaintance with the Genius, Cuſtoms and tranſactions of paſt Ages, is, and hath in fact proved, the moſt uſeful Inſtrument of aſcertaining the genuineneſs of all ancient Writings. It hath eſtabliſhed ſuch ſound Rules and indubitable Marks, drawn from thoſe Sources and built on the Nature and Reaſon of things, as will ſerve to guide us almoſt with certainty in diſtinguiſhing the real books of inſpired Scripture from any of the ſpurious imitations of it. It hath deduced the Conveyance of them down from the times of the Apoſtles to our own, marked the ſeveral Removes, ſhewn thoſe Removes to have been in fact but few, and at each ſtep demonſtrated the Identity of the Goſpels then in Uſe with thoſe of which we are poſſeſſed at this Day. And it will in general, when applied to the ſacred Books with that ſobriety, diſcretion, and deference, which both the importance of the Matter they contain and the dignity of their Original require, contribute moſt effectually to illuſtrate as well as to guard and tranſmit them ſafe and uncorrupt to the lateſt Generations.

So far then is that confident Aſſertion from being true, that the Reſurrection of Letters has been fatal to the Cauſe of Chriſtianity, ever ſince which period it has been in its Decay — that this very Circumſtance hath been chiefly inſtrumental in eſtabliſhing the primary and Capital ſupport of it, its Hiſtorical Evidence. Fatal indeed it was to the depraved Syſtem of Popery, and to the many groſs corruptions and falſe principles thereby introduced, which had long disfigured the genuine purity of Religion and weakened its Credit. But to the cauſe of pure and undefiled Chriſtianity it was in the higheſt degree beneficial and ſalutary; reſtoring the Credibility of it to its ancient Luſtre, replacing it on its only proper foundation, and giving to that foundation additional meaſures of ſtrength and ſtability.

And ſo far is this notion of a progreſſive and regular diminution of the Credit of all Hiſtorical Relations, in proportion to the number of Ages thro' which they are conveyed, from being Juſt, that it appears to be altogether groundleſs and chimerical. The compariſon of the ſtate of the Scripture Records in the preſent and in different periods of paſt Ages, affords not barely an Exception but a direct confutation of the Rule. And in truth this Decreaſe, ſo often as

as it actually happens, is owing immediately and properly to quite other Cauſes than diſtance or Length of Time, to a Spirit of Fraud which contrives and propagates forgeries, — of Lazineſs and ſupine indifference which ſuffers valuable memorials to periſh, — of Credulity which embraces Truth and fiction indiſcriminately, — and of Ignorance, alike unable to apply the means of aſcertaining the one, or of detecting the other. Time is no otherwiſe concerned in the Effect than by Accident. Thoſe real Cauſes may take place in the ſhorteſt ſpace of time, and may not in the longeſt, juſt as the peculiar circumſtances, diſpoſition, and leading principles of each ſucceeding Age happen to promote or diſcourage their prevalence and Operation. But to ſuppoſe in general, that either Religious or indeed any Hiſtory, muſt from ſome inherent and neceſſary efficiency of Time as ſuch, ſuffer a ſenſible and conſtant abatement of its truth, and ſink continually from one degree of uncertainty to a greater, is as little conformable to Fact and Experience, as it is ill ſupported by the Reaſon of the Thing itſelf.

From this view of the Authenticity of the Goſpel Hiſtory, I proceed, Secondly, to the Miraculous Facts therein recorded, and to enquire, what appearances of Decreaſe are to be found

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in regard to this eſſential evidence of the Chriſtian Revelation. And now, if the Evangelic Hiſtory is really placed in ſuch advantageous circumſtances of credibility, and ſo far removed from defect or decay, the ſimilar ſtate of the Miracles related therein, muſt be included in it and follow by neceſſary conſequence. For all thoſe Arguments uſually taken from the perſonal character, circumſtances, and ſituation of the Witneſſes, the allegation of which might otherwiſe have been precluded, will now, when the Hiſtory itſelf of which they make a part, is cleared from all doubt and ſuſpicion, be urged with the utmoſt propriety and concluſiveneſs of ſtrict reaſoning. Indeed, after this Point is once clearly eſtabliſhed, the weight of their Teſtimony muſt in this or in any Age howſoever remote, in which it is ſo eſtabliſhed, be preciſely the ſame as it was even in Times the neareſt to that of the Tranſactions themſelves.

But tho' the Truth of all traditional Miracles, reſts immediately and properly on Teſtimony, and that of the Scriptural in particular is confirmed in an extraordinary manner by this ſingle evidence, yet there may be other circumſtances which may give both to the Reality of ſuch Facts and to the Veracity of the Records themſelves, an high additional degree of Credit. And

theſe Circumſtances may be more perfectly underſtood, (if not diſcovered and brought to light,) in Ages the moſt remote from that of the Events confirmed by them. If the Goſpel Miracles had been permanent in their Natural Effects, as indeed they were only Temporary, ſome laſting Veſtiges of them would no doubt have ſtill continued. For this is evidently the caſe of many of the Wonders of the Old Teſtament. Thus the accurate reſearches made by later Ages in Natural Hiſtory, into the preſent ſtate of the Earth and the peculiar Situation of many Marine Bodies found in it, have brought forth Appearances to our View, which are obviouſly accountable from and indeed quite inexplicable on any other ſuppoſition, than that of the Truth of the earlieſt Miracle in Scripture, the Univerſal Deluge. In the ſame manner many viſible and ſtriking ſignatures of other ſupernatural interpoſitions of the Almighty related in Holy Writ, have been diſcovered upon a careful ſurvey of thoſe places, in which his Wonderful works were diſplayed. Not however, that the Belief of thoſe great Events is to be directly grounded on ſuch Appearances, but that they may be conſidered as ſtrong Collateral Evidences in ſupport of their Truth; diſtinct from that of the Written Teſtimony, which they both confirm and illuſtrate

illuſtrate in many particulars, and, being yet viſible to our Senſes, obviate at once this notion of the preſent decay of its credibility. Indeed the Uſe they are of in reſpect to Sacred Hiſtory is much the ſame with that of Inſcriptions, Coins, and other ſurviving Monuments of Claſſical Antiquity in regard to Profane. Both alike ſtrengthen the general Credit of the ancient Writers with whom they are reſpectively connected, and evince the certainty as well as determine the circumſtances of many illuſtrious and important events. And though no traces of a Phyſical Nature are now extant to confirm the Miracles of Chriſt and his Apoſtles, yet there is One not leſs certain and concluſive in favour of their Reality; I mean the Exiſtence of Chriſtianity itſelf, which conſidering the almoſt unſurmountable obſtacles of every kind that can poſſibly be conceived, which lay in the way of its Progreſs, if the Extraordinary Facts on which it was built were all the while Fictitious and unreal, muſt itſelf be looked upon as the greateſt Miracle that ever exiſted in the World.

If then the Wondrous Works of our Lord have ſtill an unimpaired title to their admiſſion as Real Facts, ſomething yet more poſitive may be advanced in reſpect to their Validity as Proofs of a Commiſſion from Heaven. Many of the

Jews,

Jews, even while our Saviour manifeſted his Signs and Wonders daily before their Eyes, and appealed to his Works as proofs of his coming from God, ſaw not or at leaſt acknowledged not the force of this Proof: Some reſolving all his actions into the Power of the Prince of the Devils, and others in after-ages evaded it by yet more frivolous and improbable ſolutions. The Heathen World had in general a ſtrong perſwaſion of the Powers of Magic, and had recourſe to the influence of this Principle to account for every alarming performance, which they could not otherwiſe explain and the teſtimony of which they knew not how to invalidate. The Atheiſtic notions too of Some, and the unworthy conceptions which All of them entertained of God, either excluded his Agency entirely from all events whatſoever, or at leaſt hindered them from ſeeing the neceſſary Connexion there muſt be between a Supernatural Act, and the exertion of his Almighty Power. This Ignorance of Nature, and of God, it is certain, for ſome time retarded the General Reception of the Goſpel. But neither of theſe Cauſes at preſent ſubſiſts as a bar to the Credibility of the Chriſtian Revelation as ſupported by Miraculous Evidence. For, as the improved inſight into Nature, occaſioned by the cultivation and ad-

vancement of ſound Philoſophy, has exploded the unmeaning pretences of Sorcery and Magic, and afforded the means of diſtinguiſhing Real Miracles from the feats of Artifice or the Illuſions of Craft, ſo the better knowlege of the ſupreme Being, introduced by pure Religion, directs us at once to refer every truly Miraculous Event to the Great Governour of all things: by whoſe Power alone as the courſe of Nature is inceſſantly conducted in every part, ſo by his immediate Act or expreſs appointment only can it be at any time interrupted or overruled. And therefore ſo far as both the Nature of a true Miracle, and the Concluſion to be drawn therefrom in favour of the Chriſtian Revelation is more generally known and underſtood, this Age may be thought in this reſpect to have the advantage over every other which has preceded it.

The Evidence of Prophecy comes next under conſideration, which affords yet more abundant confirmation of the Point I have been enlarging upon. For as a Series of ancient Predictions, gradually delivered, helped to keep alive in every Age the expectation of the coming of Chriſt, as well as to point him out upon his actual appearance, ſo a ſucceſſion of Events, predicted by Chriſt and his Apoſtles, and gradually accompliſhed, ſerved in like manner to confirm

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and ſtrengthen in after-Ages the conviction of his being actually come forth from God. Of this kind are uſually and juſtly reckoned, the Perſecutions which his Diſciples met with from the World — The falſe Chriſts and falſe Prophets which aroſe — The Hereſies which ſprang up like Tares and checked the growth of the Good Seed, and yet notwithſtanding theſe and other obſtacles, the amazing Progreſs and Propagation of the Goſpel — The deſtruction of Jeruſalem, and the total ſubverſion both of the Polity and Religion of the Jewiſh People — And more particularly, the preſent diſperſion of that Race over the face of the whole Earth — and above all, the encroachments and uſurpation of the Papal power, with the corrupt and ſuperſtitious doctrines and lying Wonders of the "Great City which ſtandeth upon ſeven Moun-"tains:" Events, improbable at the time they were foretold, and which no Human Wiſdom could foreſee, or the then ſtate of things afford the leaſt ground for conceiving: But which have been as punctually and remarkably completed, as they were before minutely ſpecified and deſcribed. Beſides the General Proof which theſe Events give of the whole of Chriſtianity, They in a particular manner eſtabliſh both the authenticity and the inſpiration of the Books in

which thoſe Prophecies are contained; and not leſs ſo the certainty of the Miracles therein recorded: ſince the performance of Works beyond the ſphere of Human Power to effect, is not more ſupernatural, than the Prediction of events beyond the reach of Human knowlege to foreſee. But what is moſt obſervable, is, that this accompliſhment of the Prophecies of Chriſt took place ſucceſſively, and at different intervals, and in Tranſactions many of which exiſt as a ſtanding Proof to this Day. It is indeed an Evidence peculiar to the Ages which followed the declaration of the Goſpel, and which roſe by regular gradations to its preſent height of Validity, and is ſtill going on from ſtrength to ſtrength by the ſucceſſion of other Prophecies which haſten towards their Completion. And here not to inſiſt on the helps which Science and Learning have afforded to the elucidating and ſetting this Prophetic Evidence in full Light, an obvious advantage ariſes from our being placed at a diſtance in order to the ſurvey of it, to the taking a compleat View of all which preceded and followed, tracing the connexion, and forming an Idea of the uniform tendency, of every Part of it: which of courſe muſt render the whole more cogent and ſatisfactory, than when a ſingle Part only is viewed ſeparately from the reſt.

Upon

Upon the whole it appears, that the Author and Finiſher of our Faith, hath in part already fulfilled, and we truſt will fully accompliſh his Promiſe of continuing with his true Diſciples unto the End of the World. The Proofs given of his Divine Miſſion in his own Life-time were Public, Alarming, frequently repeated, and in the higheſt degree convincing. And leaſt Generations to come might either be ignorant of thoſe Original Grounds of conviction, or doubt their certainty if entruſted only to Oral Tradition, His Bleſſed Spirit was immediately preſent both in the compiling faithfully and in conveying down ſafely, the Authentic Charter of Human Salvation. Nor did he leave himſelf without further Witneſs, but imparted to After-Ages his "ſure "Word of Prophecy as a Light ſhining in a "dark place." And tho' in ſome Periods he has judicially permitted the Luſtre of his Religion to be for a time obſcured and impaired, yet afterwards he hath graciouſly been pleaſed to reſtore it in full meaſure "as at the beginning." Indeed whatever new or additional weight has been above ſuppoſed to be given to any of the Goſpel Evidences either by the peculiar circumſtances of later times, or by the improvement of Science and Literature, or by any other ſeemingly Human Cauſes, it is ſtill properly to be

conſidered

conſidered in the ſame Light, as the Conſequence of the Promiſe and Reſult of the Providential goodneſs of the Almighty: who oftentimes employs the Natural Powers and Ordinary labours of Men as inſtruments in his hands for the advancement of his own Divine Purpoſes; who both directs and bleſſes their otherwiſe ineffectual endeavours; and who "though "Paul planteth and Apollos watereth, alone giv-"eth the Increaſe."

There is however an obvious Preſumption which may be thought to lye againſt this account of the preſent ſtate of the Goſpel Credibility: namely the viſible abatement of the Credit actually given to it, and the increaſe of Deiſts and Unbeleivers in this beyond the example of former Ages. A Circumſtance greatly to be lamented and which amidſt ſuch accumulated evidence is the more inexcuſable: but which concludes not in the leaſt againſt the Real condition and force of the Evidence itſelf, how ſtrongly ſoever it may reflect on the perverſity, the prejudices and the depravity of Men. Scepticiſm may, even amidſt circumſtances the moſt favourable to Truth, be wrought up in ſome minds to ſo extravagant an height, that no Force of Argument, no means of Conviction ſhall be able to ſubdue it. And Examples of this

this turn verify the obſervation of our bleſſed Lord, that "if they hearken not to Moſes and "the Prophets, neither would they be perſwa-"ded, tho' one roſe from the Dead."

But tho' Infidelity has enlarged its borders, and propagated its pernicious tenets with more daring inſolence, yet the Providence of God, which draws forth Good from Evil and maketh his Enemies inſtrumental to his Glory, hath rendered even this Circumſtance beneficial to the Cauſe of his Religion. For as every ſingle Proof of Revelation has been at times attacked and diſputed, this gave occaſion to a more diligent examination and more accurate diſcuſſion of thoſe Proofs: which ended, not barely in the confutation of all Deiſtic cavils, but in the enlargement of Chriſtian knowlege, and in the diſcovery of many important truths, which had otherwiſe lain neglected and concealed. And it is no more than juſtice to add, that ſince the Æra of Proteſtantiſm, this Nation and Church have produced Advocates for the Faith, who in point of extenſive knowlege and maſterly reaſoning and in the actual ſervices they have thereby performed, are to be parallelled only with the firſt Apologiſts of the Chriſtian Cauſe.

The Application from what has been ſaid will I conceive naturally be expected to turn upon

upon the ſubſerviency of Learning to the Intereſts of Religion. For it has been ſhewn, that Each of the Primary Evidences of it have in fact received both Light and ſtrength from the culture of uſeful knowlege, and in the abſence of it have always proportionably ſuffered or been leſs underſtood. Nor is it indolently to be thought, that the truth of the Chriſtian Diſpenſation is to be taken for granted; a principle, under which every falſe Religion might be ſheltered as eaſily as the trueſt. It muſt indeed at all times be proved, in order to its gaining a ſatisfactory entrance into the mind and a ſteady influence over the Heart. And it muſt in this Age be defended, againſt Gainſayers not more prompted by malice, than prepared with talents, acquired as well as natural, to oppoſe it. But it would be an unpardonable preſumption to attempt either the Proof or the Defence, without a competent Knowlege of ancient Languages, an acquaintance with the tranſactions and Uſages of Antiquity, a ſkill in the received Rules of Criticiſm, not to mention an inſight into the ſeveral branches of the Science of Nature.

But perhaps thoſe parts of Learning, by which the external Proofs of Chriſtianity may be enforced, will be more willingly admitted,

while

while the Speculative Sciences only are looked on with a ſuſpicious Eye, as being unſerviceable, if not detrimental, to the advancement of it. But it is to be remembered, that Infidelity is buſied not barely in attacking the Pillars of our Faith, but in undermining it, in ſapping it to the Root, by calling in queſtion the Want of Revelation, the congruity of it to the Attributes of God, and the rectitude of its Contents. Is it therefore a deſertion of our Poſt, to repel theſe attacks, to obviate the ill Impreſſions they might make, and to give Mankind that Satisfaction, which they have a Right to expect, and which the truth of the caſe will ſo manifeſtly bear? Is it of no Uſe, to prepoſſeſs men in favour of Revealed Religion, and to diſpoſe them before-hand to liſten more attentively to its other proofs, by repreſenting the End of it as excellent and noble, worthy of the goodneſs of a Benevolent God, and ſuited to the exigencies and condition of weak and ſinful Man? Is not the internal Evidence of the Goſpel, though no direct proof of its being the actual Gift of Heaven, yet ſuch a Preſumption at leaſt as is ſcarce poſſible to be reſiſted? And it is to the purpoſe of the preſent Subject to add, that from the Nature of the Materials of which it is compoſed, it muſt be neceſſarily perpetual, and there-

fore is of itſelf alone a ſure Counterpoiſe to any ſuppoſed Decays, to which the Poſitive Evidences might by ſome Perſons be thought ſubject. The Knowlege therefore of Moral Duties and that of Natural Religion, are jointly with the reſt before recited, to be carefully cultivated, and may occaſionally be well employed, in "the Work of the Miniſtry, for the edifying of "the Body of Chriſt."

One cannot therefore obſerve without ſome ſurprize, the endeavours uſed to diſcourage the Improvement of our Natural Powers, by decrying this their moſt valuable exerciſe and application; nor hear without much contempt, the perpetual ſtrains of flattery addreſſed to the Illiterate, and the low compliments beſtowed upon Ignorance. If however the Rational method of ſupporting Chriſtianity ſhould be generally diſcarded and laid aſide, and the connexion between ſound Learning and true Religion diſſolved, if in a word, the Spirit of Fanaticiſm, ſo anxiouſly propagated, ſhould again revive and prevail; which indeed the better Judgment of theſe enlightened times, and the experience of the ill uſe ever made of this Spirit, give us but little reaſon to apprehend: Chriſtianity may perhaps for a while be upheld, or rather the Appearance of it extorted, by Power, or the flights of Enthu-

Enthuſiaſm may impreſs ſome deluſive image of it on the Fancy, but the real Subſtance muſt in proportion diſappear, and loſe its only ſure hold on the minds and conſciences of Men: its real Evidences being gradually diſregarded, and growing out of Uſe, and its Credibility, in conſequence of this, in time really wearing away.

This is the Natural tendency of theſe Principles. And juſt in the ſame proportion and manner, by contrary ſentiments and purſuits, by the due improvement and diſcreet exerciſe of our Reaſon, the Grounds of Religion will be moſt effectually preſerved from Decay, and the Doctrines of it from Corruption, and the Faith in Jeſus Chriſt will, with the aſſiſtance and Grace of Almighty God, continue "alway even unto "the End of the World."

FINIS.

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